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## Texts and Contexts: Uncovering the Complexities of Afro-Atlantic Responses to the Haitian Revolution

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## Texts and Contexts: Uncovering the Complexities of Afro-Atlantic Responses to the Haitian Revolution

Elizabeth Kelly, University of Miami

Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon, eds. *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution*. (Routledge, New York, Abington, 2010), 259 pp.

The Haitian revolution sent a shockwave through the Atlantic world that until recently has been relatively unexplored. Haiti occupied a unique position in the early nineteenth century as the only black republic and the first colony in the Caribbean to achieve both independence and an end to African slavery. CLR James' foundational history of the Haitian revolution began to bring that event's contribution to the forefront of twentieth century scholarship. Even so, few scholars in the twentieth century considered the impact of the historical, political, economic and social impact of Haiti until Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Sybille Fischer famously pointed out the silencing of the Haitian revolution both in historical archives and in contemporary scholarship and called for further research that would begin to break the silence surrounding Haiti's profound impact on the modern world.

Jackson and Bacon's *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution* begins to answer that call by demonstrating, however, that African American intellectuals throughout the nineteenth century and into the mid-twentieth century have never participated in such a silencing, and in fact have pioneered new ways of thinking about the revolution and the subsequent nation's impact on the Atlantic world over the last 200 years. Jackson and Bacon's collection combines contemporary scholarship that addresses the influence of Haiti on black intellectual and cultural movements with archival documents that demonstrate the flourishing conversation about Haiti in the same period. The volume creates a nuanced conversation between generations of scholars, organizers, and artists that paints a sweeping picture of African Americans' artistic, political and scholarly responses to the Haitian revolution and the particularly nuanced discourse to which they were responding.

The collection's editors argue that "the Haitian revolution has been for African Americans of different eras a vehicle through which collective memory and identity has been created and transformed, an event that has inspired and influenced black nationalism, abolitionism, black socialist and revolutionary thought, and Pan Africanism" (2). Hence the collection seeks to represent that influence through both contemporary scholarship and historical documents that address a broad time period – from roughly the onset of the revolution in the 1790s until the 1950s. This volume is comprised of a number of focused

examinations of specific archives that reveal distinct ways in which the influence of the Haitian revolution made a profound intervention. One of the most unique aspects of the collection of scholarly work included is the broad range of topics and time periods the articles address. While a great deal has been written about, for example, the influence of the Haitian revolution on the US civil war, its impact on the earlier nineteenth century has yet to receive the same level of attention. This collection's essays trace its impact from the late eighteenth century through the Harlem Renaissance, formulating a picture of several generations' responses to the revolution that is unparalleled in other works. As a collection, this volume works to both resist scholarly tendencies to periodize such responses and the disciplinary constraints that often limit our understanding of the vast and complex effect of the Haitian revolution on transnational black cultures.

The selections included in the first half of Jackson and Bacon's collection range from scholarship on early nineteenth century newspapers' focus on Haiti to symbolic reimaginings of the revolution's leaders during the US civil war. The first half of the volume is comprised of a number of works covering several cultural and intellectual movements of the period, including emigration from the United States to Haiti in the 1820s, the resulting growth in black transnational movements in the period, treatments of the Haitian revolution in black newspapers in the antebellum period and their influence on constructing black transnational identities. This cluster of scholarship addresses a second generation of black responses to Haiti that played a significant role in understanding Afro-Atlantic identities as transnational and subversive. The collection goes on to consider the impact of the revolution on emigration patterns and their corresponding recruitment materials, as well as newspaper coverage of events in Haiti as equal contributors to raising and formulating black transnational consciousness in the early nineteenth century.

The second half of the volume turns to primary texts that elucidate African American responses to the Haitian revolution over several generations of intellectuals. This section is particularly useful because of its broad range and inclusion of archival material of varying genres that is difficult to access elsewhere, making it an extremely useful as a tool for both research and teaching. The texts include speeches, fictional and non-fictional material published in *Freedom's Journal* (a particularly useful inclusion as several of the articles in the first section explore the journal's treatment of Haiti), pamphlets, and convention proceedings of the nineteenth century. The second half of the collection also includes an interesting selection of works from the twentieth century, including several brief histories like James McCune Smith's "Lecture on the Haytien Revolutions," Frederick Douglass' "Lecture on Haiti, and excerpts from CLR James' "A History of Pan-African Revolt," a less famous work than *The Black Jacobins*, but one which gives a condensed history of the revolution before

independence. What follows is a brief review of sample documents from the first and second sections of the collection, each of which highlights the kinds of unique contributions this volume brings together.

Jackson and Brown's collection begins with considering scholarship on some of the earliest responses to the Haitian revolution. This scholarship frequently intersects well with other work in related fields, like Atlantic Studies, that do not focus specifically on Haiti. For example, one of the first essays to appear in the collection is Julius Scott's "Afro-American Sailors and the International Communication Network: *The Case of Newport Bowers*," a fascinating exploration of the maritime world of information networks that extended into revolutionary Saint Domingue. While scholars have turned an increasing eye towards the sea as a space of black autonomy and mobility in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the relationship between what critics like Paul Gilroy have termed the black Atlantic and the cultural, political, and socio-economic influences of the independent nation of Haiti in the nineteenth century remain relatively unexplored. Scott uses the case of Newport Bowers, an African American sailor who settled in revolutionary Saint Domingue, to consider the ways in which African American seamen witnessed and participated in social, political, and economic opportunities made possible by Haiti's unique environment, which even in the 1790s included an abolishment of slavery. Using a variety of archival records, Scott reconstructs the possibilities of Bowers' experience in Saint Domingue, positing that although little was recorded of his time there, fragmented records of shipping, commerce, and social life in Saint Domingue suggest that Bowers participated in international networks of trade and information that were considerably broadened by his time in the colony. Bowers' own testimony, Scott argues, expressed solidarity between the international community of free black sailors and the rebels in Saint Domingue, and understood their struggles as intimately connected. The Bowers case is one of many, including Olaudah Equiano's and Tom King's, that shed light on the kinds of transnational black networks that had begun to develop in throughout the revolutionary Atlantic in the late eighteenth century. Scott effectively links these networks to slave rebellions in the United States and a growing black international Afro-Atlantic perspective that understood the Haitian revolution's profound impact on black intellectuals in the United States.

Scott's article on the Bowers case highlights one of the earliest generations of the black thinkers whose lives and ideas developed further into specific forms of transnational identification and consciousness. These identifications are also emphasized in the collection's inclusion of scholarship focused on the antebellum period, which turns towards examining the symbolic meanings of the revolution handed down to the generation of thinkers of the 1850s and 1860s. For example, Matthew Clavin's "American Toussaints:

Symbol, Subversion and the Black Atlantic Tradition in the American Civil War” explores the renewed interest in Toussaint L’Ouverture in the wake of black enlistments in the Union army. For Clavin, the symbolic power of the Haitian revolution’s most prominent leader is most recognizable in both “the great faith that Americans placed in violent sacrifice” in general and African-American identification with L’Ouverture as an affirmation of black masculinity (108). Clavin begins his discussion with examining the works of Frederick Douglass (who is also the focus of another article in the collection) in terms of both his narrative’s emphasis on violence as a means of establishing masculine identity and his invocation of Toussaint L’Ouverture’s memory as a rallying cry for black participation in the U.S. civil war. Clavin goes on to cite a number of black intellectuals and white abolitionists and writers who similarly both used L’Ouverture as a symbol of black masculinity and likened tales of black heroism in the civil war to L’Ouverture’s legacy. He reads the written and oral cultures surrounding L’Ouverture’s legacy in among black soldiers as coding the civil war in the US as an extension of the Haitian revolution, and makes a powerful case for their connection in the black imagination.

While the diversity of texts included in the first half of the collection is certainly impressive, their pairing with primary materials in the latter half is what gives the collection as a whole a unique perspective in considering the Haitian revolution’s impact on multiple generations of intellectuals. Among the primary materials collected in the latter half of the text are several speeches by prominent African American thinkers who directly addressed the history of the Haitian revolution in attempts to raise consciousness about Haiti’s situation after independence and the striking example Haiti set of ending slavery. Among the excerpts included is William Wells Brown’s “St. Domingo – its Revolutions and its Patriots,” a speech delivered in 1854 and republished in the U.S. and Europe as a pamphlet the following year. Brown’s recognizes the transnational nature of the Haitian struggle and reads the Haitian revolution as a warning to slaveholders in the U.S., pausing his retelling of events to link the fate of the colony of St. Domingo to that of the U.S. to ask “who knows but that a Toussaint, a Christophe, a Rigaud, a Clervaux, and a Dessalines, may some day appear in the Southern States of this Union?” (188). He goes on to describe the connection between black military participation in the U.S. revolution and the Haitian Revolution, arguing that the Haitian revolution, because it ended slavery in the colony, resulted in upholding the rights asserted in the U.S. Constitution. The speech cleverly compares the revolutionary ideologies of both contexts, and rhetorically positions Haiti as morally superior because of its radical assertion of the rights of all men. As such, Brown’s excerpt provides a fruitful example of the kinds of transnational identifications and political goals African Americans formulated and valued in the mid-nineteenth century.

The second half of the collection makes an interesting move by including works of fiction that express a similar set of values and identifications. One of the later excerpts included in the collection is Ralph Ellison's "Mister Toussan," a short story that presents the Haitian revolution as a cultural touchstone for young boys in the South. The story follows an exchange between two stock characters in Ellison's short fiction as they orally reproduce the history of Toussaint L'Ouverture and assert understandings of that history's influence on their perceptions of themselves. The boys' dialogue reads as a call and response retelling of L'Ouverture's interactions with the French, an interaction that characterizes L'Ouverture as a transnational figure of empowered black masculine identity. The speakers in the story also recognize the silencing of Haitian history in their schoolbooks, while suggesting that the inclusion of oral retellings of that history allow the boys (and by extension, Ellison's readers) to forge new connections with their own identities. Thinking through the connections between a text like Ellison's and those of his intellectual predecessors, like William Wells Brown, initiates an interesting and unusual set of scholarly questions about Haiti's impact on African Americans that the collection calls to us to begin considering.

As a whole, Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon's *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution* presents a particularly useful resource for scholars studying the profound impact of Haiti on the Atlantic world, a growing field that corresponds to an archive that has historically been silenced, scattered, and difficult to access. As the field develops, it may also become a helpful volume for teaching Afro-Atlantic intellectualism and black transnationalism. As a nuanced collection of archival materials and contemporary scholarship, Jackson and Bacon's collection contributes to a broader understanding of the Haitian revolution's impact on the Afro-Atlantic world and sets a high standard for the organization, research and publication of anthologies geared towards addressing the silences surrounding Haiti in earlier scholarship.